



**The role of community based service learning courses in the retention of nontraditional students:  
Comparing results by institutional type and reporting methodological issues**

Susan Reed, Associate Professor, School for New Learning, DePaul University [sreed@depaul.edu]  
Helen Rosenberg, Associate Professor & Faculty Director for Community-based Learning and Research,  
University of Wisconsin-Parkside [rosenbeh@uwp.edu]  
Howard Rosing, Executive Director of the Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning,  
DePaul University [hrosing@depaul.edu]  
Anne Statham, Professor Director of the Service Learning Program, University of Southern Indiana  
[aastatham@usi.edu]

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**Summary**

Students who participate in community-based service learning (CBSL) projects express a deepened sense of belonging to the community, a better understanding of course content, enhanced interpersonal problem solving skills, and firmer ideas about future career plans (Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray, 2001; Schleiter & Statham, 2005). While such data is important to understanding the personal impact of engagement, institutions of higher learning are seeking evidence that this methodology promotes higher academic achievement and retention rates for nontraditional students given predicted increases in that student population (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2009).

Analysis of the NSSE survey finds that students with nontraditional characteristics are less likely to have experienced “high impact practices” such as CBSL (Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup and Gonyea, 2006) but those who do may have even stronger benefits than their peers. A Coro Center for Civic Leadership study identified inflexible work schedules and inadequate childcare as the most important perceived obstacles to civic participation, noting that balancing the demands of school, work, home, and civic life can be difficult for today’s nontraditional students (Crowley, 2005)

In this paper, the authors build upon their previous research (Rosenberg, H., Reed, S., Statham, A., & Rosing, H., 2011) to assess the impact of CBSL on nontraditional student retention at three universities in the Midwest. Working with the office of institutional research at each university, data were analyzed to identify students with nontraditional characteristics and compare those who have completed a service learning course with those who have not.

It is important to continue to explore whether the CBSL methodology is achieving the same outcomes we have reason to believe are enjoyed by nontraditional students’ more traditional counterparts. With such information, institutions can design effective programs that target this population so that these students experience college as connected with the communities from which they come and understand the multiple roles they play in that integration.

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